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Summary

Dutch sexual health policies explicitly aim to empower young people to take responsibility and make good decisions about their sexual lives, in order to prevent adverse outcomes such as unintended pregnancy, STIs or sexual assault. More generally, in the Western social context, 'choice' has become a central organising concept in the constitution of modern identity (Harris and Dobson 2015). In sexual health policy-making, the concept of individual choice is manifest in the emphasis on autonomy and the right to choose (in Dutch: *zelfbeschikking and keuzevrijheid*). This is a discourse of individual entitlement: the focus is on the individual 'choosing' subject (Richardson 2017). Although this focus promotes the value of individual freedom and sexual and reproductive rights, it also requires actors to be in control and responsible at all times (Bay-Cheng 2015).

However, while studying the stories young people in the Netherlands told about their sexual practices and choices, I found that free choice was a problematic concept and agency was not as autonomous as it sounded. Young people were navigating multiple desires, expectations and social norms, and combining different social identities. Moreover, the paradigm of individual responsibility that is associated with choice and autonomy obscured social structures and gendered inequalities that limited their choices. Running into trouble, for example an unintended pregnancy or sexual coercion, easily led to self-blame and feelings of guilt. This raised the question of how sexual agency could be conceptualised in a way that included social navigation. How can we recognise the complex and subtle navigation of sexual agency in our approach to young people? And how should sexuality education be transformed in order to prepare young people for the complex social navigation of sexuality? With these research questions I started this PhD project.

Analytical lens and methodology

In this dissertation, I approach young people as actors who are able to enact sexual desires, identities and practices. I focus specifically on young people's *negotiation* of their sexual identities, desires and practices, which situates my study at the interface between the individual and society. Young people's perspectives and strategies are central to my research, but I also analyse the way their stories reflect social norms, gendered ideology and sexual discourses, and the morality and narrative landscape that surrounds them. I use a broad definition of sexuality as my framework (WHO 2006), including sexual and gender identities, thoughts and desires, values and roles, relationships and sexual behaviour. This broad definition of sexuality fits within a social-constructionist approach, which assumes that sexuality is constructed differently across cultures and over time (van Reeuwijk 2010). Moreover, it emphasises the interconnectedness of body and mind, and of individual identities and practices and their social context.

To study the lived realities of young people, I draw on two approaches: sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon 1984) and sexual

storytelling (Plummer 1995). Both focus on the interplay between the individual and cultural, social norms. Plummer's approach includes reflection on the stories the participants tell about their identities and practices, and the role their stories play in their identity construction and their reputation management. In line with this approach, each case study is based on the life histories of young people (see 1.5 for details about the methodology). Conceptualising sexual agency as the multi-layered negotiation of sexual identities and practices of individuals within society and social groups, with partners, peers and family, I selected four case studies to explore in depth how young people negotiated sexual agency. The four case studies were designed to explore young people's sexual agency while navigating sexual *discourses* (Chapter 4), negotiating sexual *identities* (Chapter 5), negotiating sexual *intimacy* (Chapter 6), and negotiating the meaning of *consequences* of sexual behaviour (Chapter 7). A meta-reflection at the end of the dissertation connects the findings of these case studies in order to answer the research questions.

Diversity as a key concern

Although the four studies focused on different subjects and involved different groups of young people, they all shared the goal of learning more about the way young people negotiate their choices as (sexual) agents and about the strategies used to deal with conflicting discourses and social norms. Each of the four studies included a rich cultural diversity of participants. Their varying and intersecting cultural backgrounds contributed to a better understanding of how different sexual cultures interact, and offered opportunities for analysing both differences and commonalities in discourses and practices. The characteristics of contemporary Dutch society, including attitudes and ideologies concerning gender, sexuality and migration, rights and obligations, and sexual health policies, influence the broader social landscape young people have to navigate. By analysing how young people from different backgrounds negotiated their identities, their stories and their practices, different components of sexual agency became visible.

Four-component model of sexual agency

Sexual agency lies at the heart of this thesis. Agency, including sexual agency, is always connected to concepts of power. Sexual agency is connected to different concepts of the self, being autonomous or dependent, being in control of one's body, and becoming a subject through the body. Relationships play a crucial role in creating possibilities and constraints for individuals when it comes to developing sexual agency. Sexual agency can be viewed as the strategic negotiations of an individual to situate oneself and one's choices in a social context, maintain relationships, and make sense of experiences. These strategic negotiations take place in a broader social and cultural context which imposes constraints on the agency of all people; however, due to structural inequalities some people experience more constraints than others.

Drawing on my fieldwork and the conceptualisations offered by scholars such as Bell (2012), Phạm (2013), Benhabib (1999), and Tolman,

Bowman, and Fahs (2014), I advance a definition of sexual agency that includes four different interrelated components: (1) embodied agency; (2) bonded agency; (3) narrative agency; and (4) moral agency. Each component has its own link to the broader social context, and the interaction between the different components of agency and the social context is crucial to understanding the strategic negotiations engaged in by young people (Chapter 2). First, embodied agency concerns the processes through which young people engage in sexual practices, develop sexual subjectivities and position themselves in relation to the concepts of sexual identity, desire and practice made available to them by the context and culture in which they live. The life stories of young people in the four case studies showed how they developed their subjectivity and their sense of self by engaging in sexual practices, comparing themselves with others and evaluating their experiences in relation to the concepts available to them. When reflecting on their sexual practices, young people may embrace or distance themselves from social norms and dominant stories. The second type of agency is bonded agency, which is narrated in the form of strategies, actions and negotiations involved in maintaining relationships and navigating broader social expectations. Talking about their experiences and the choices they made, many young people described the manoeuvres they undertook to secure social support. Their stories highlighted their awareness of the impact of their actions on the reputation of their families. The third component is narrative agency: the capacity to weave a life story that makes sense to the individual self. Narrative agency consists of the accounts young people give of their choices and their lives and those of others. The fourth component is moral agency: the reflection upon and positioning of oneself within moral frameworks. This moral positioning may be connected to feeling responsible for not hurting or bringing shame on others such as their family, but also, more specifically, to the reasoning behind terminating an unintended pregnancy or giving birth. The life stories of young people show how sexual agency is forged and expressed within a context and is manifested through individuals' responsiveness to others. Young people's connectedness to families, friends and communities (bonded agency) interacts with the processes through which they develop sexual subjectivities and position themselves in relation to concepts of sexual identity, desire and practices (embodied agency). Moreover, young people's accounts also reveal how they navigate different normative landscapes while developing their sexual selves and engaging in sexual practices, and how they develop moral and narrative agency within these processes. The four different components of sexual agency are intertwined and deeply influence each other.

Developing one's sexual self, including the four components of sexual agency, within diverse social, cultural, narrative and moral landscapes is challenging for all young people, but not to the same extent for everyone. The road is bumpier for young people deviating from cultural 'normalcy', for instance by being non-heterosexual, gender-fluid or transgender, or by not conforming to the cultural ideas of being a 'good girl' or a 'real man'. They have more trouble in obtaining social support and maintaining relationships with families and peers, hear fewer stories at school and in the media they

can identify with, and are confronted more often with moral judgments and social stigma.

Sexuality education

Viewing sexual agency as a complex and subtle process of navigation between competing expectations, discourses and cultural influences has consequences for sexuality education. An exclusive focus on autonomy, assertiveness and making one's own free choices does not suffice, as it does not recognise and match the realities of young people. Too great a cultural emphasis on individual responsibility obscures the mutual responsibility between partners, and the impact of structural limitations and inequalities. How can we develop sexuality education that is relevant to young people's lives and takes context and strategic negotiations into account? In order to do so, I propose to expand the goals and activities of sexuality education to support young people, in all their diversity, to develop sexual agency in each of the four forms highlighted earlier: embodied, bonded, moral and narrative agency (Chapter 3). To reach this goal, sex educators should recognise and value the fact that young people are constantly negotiating their position within the social and normative landscape that surrounds them, and should no longer view sexual agency exclusively as autonomous decision-making. CSE should therefore move away from its narrow individualistic focus on danger and risk towards a broader view of sexuality as a domain of adventure and exploration (Fine and McClelland 2006; Naezer 2017) and subjectivity and morality (Allen and Carmody 2012; Lamb 2010).

First, by addressing different sexual cultures, gender norms and other social norms within the classroom, this newly comprehensive form of sexuality education will stimulate reflection and critical consciousness. It is important to consider sexual cultures as temporary and changeable, as sites of participation, negotiation, reproduction, resistance and challenge (Attwood and Smith 2011). In doing so, CSE can create an environment in which young people feel invited to take up a position, form an identity and embody a sexual self. These reflections will support both their embodied and their moral agency. Second, using real-life scenarios which do not mask the conflicts and the troubles that can be present in relationships and sexuality will support young people in gaining navigation skills and preparing for the challenges of real life. By emphasising that one learns about oneself and others by doing, and reframing 'mistakes' or 'failures' as learning experiences, CSE can provide a counterbalance to the neoliberal pressure to be successful and make the right choices. Third, to support young people in their bonded agency, educators should actively invite young people to explore their relationships to parents, peers and lovers. By recognising multiple desires, including the desire to fit in and belong to a community or family instead of striving for individual autonomy, young people can learn better how to navigate social expectations and social pressures, and develop reciprocity in relationships. Finally, by providing multiple different stories of sexual identities and practices, CSE will support young people in developing narrative agency.

Conclusion

Studying the life stories of young people, I analysed how they negotiated sexual agency in a subtle and sometimes complex way. I distinguished different forms of agency, connected to different aspects of their social context. Furthermore, I developed a model for comprehensive sexuality education, which acknowledges this navigation, stimulates a reflexive attitude towards gender norms and heteronormativity, moves beyond hegemonic sexual stories and enhances response-ability and navigation skills. Although I recognise that the development of this kind of sexuality education may be a real challenge, I do hope that this perspective on contextualised sexual agency challenges sex educators to broaden the scope of sexuality education beyond lessons in individual decision-making. Because, ultimately, sexuality education aims to empower young people to develop their gendered and sexual selves, in all their many aspects. Moreover, I hope that this book will contribute to the understanding of young people's navigation of different normative worlds, and that this will help to reduce social judgement and stigma, as well as the disproportionate emphasis on individual responsibility and good decision-making in sexual health policies and practices.